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Katie Flynn

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The Liverpool Rose

Katie Flynn has lived for many years in the north west. A compulsive writer, she started with short stories and articles and many of her early stories were broadcast on Radio Mersey. She decided to write her Liverpool series after hearing the reminiscences of family members about life in the city in the early years of the twentieth century. She also writes as Judith Saxton. For several years she has had to cope with ME but has continued to write.

The Liverpool Rose

KATIE FLYNN

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For Jim and Eileen Greenwood, who introduced me to the delights of the canal and tried not to laugh when I steered us into the bank!

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I am also indebted to Deb and Graham McCleod who lent me an out-of-print book on the canal, and to Jim and Eileen Greenwood, who pointed me in the right direction for finding out some of the more obscure details I needed, and as usual, my thanks go to the Liverpool Local History library and to the Wrexham branch library for their never-failing help.

Chapter One

June 1923

‘Lizzie! Lizzie Devlin! Our mam says you’re to go indoors at once or she’ll scalp the ears off your perishin’ head! She says she telled you afore breakfast that she’s gorra load o’ messages for you, only you slipped out on the quiet when she weren’t lookin’, and now, when she needs stuff, it ain’t there!’

Lizzie, about to throw her lucky piece of slate into the last-but-one hopscotch square, glared at the speaker, a pale, discontented-looking boy with spectacles perpetually askew on his puddingy, spot-speckled face. Of all the cousins, she told herself, wondering whether she could pretend deafness just until her slate had reached its mark, she disliked Herbie the most. He was a tale-clat, a cheat and a bully – but he was also nearly fourteen, two whole years older than she, and a great deal larger and stronger. It would not do to ignore him, she supposed crossly. But that did not mean to say she had to scurry to do his bidding. She turned to her friend Sally, throwing her bit of slate at the same time, seeing with some satisfaction that her friend’s had slithered sideways and missed its mark; with a bit of luck she might yet win the game! ‘Oh . . . I’ll just finish this game, Herbie,’ Lizzie said with pretended nonchalance, beginning to hop forward, her bare toes stirring up the dust every time she landed. ‘It won’t take but a minute, and me aunt won’t mind . . . besides, why couldn’t you go?’

She glanced at her cousin's face as she spoke, turning neatly to pick up her slate and hop back again, and saw from the way his eyes slid about that he had probably been told to run the messages but had passed the job on to her. As usual. Aunt Annie was not a bad kind of woman. She had taken Lizzie in when her parents had died, after all, though she had four boys of her own to bring up. That had been five years ago, mind you, and since then both Henry and Ned had got work and were no longer a charge on their parents, though Herbie and Denis were still at home. And it's only natural, Lizzie mused to herself, making her way back to number nine Cranberry Court, that Aunt Annie expects more help from a girl than she would from a boy: boys is pretty useless when all's said and done.

The house in the court was a back-to-back, like all the others, which meant that the only means of entry was through the front door, so Lizzie skipped up the three filthy steps which her aunt was always meaning to scrub and whiten, pushed open the rickety wooden door and turned left into the kitchen. Aunt Annie was sitting in a creaking basketwork chair with a saucepan on her lap, rather inexpertly hacking a carrot into sections and dropping them into the pan. There were obvious signs that she had already butchered a large turnip and some potatoes – and also an onion, to judge from her streaming eyes – before she began on the carrot. Blind scouse, Lizzie told herself, mentally licking her lips. Aunt Annie, perhaps because she enjoyed her food, was a first-rate cook and could make even a blind scouse enjoyable.

Her aunt looked up and grinned, displaying a number of gaps between her large teeth as her niece entered the room. 'Lizzie, love, I'm meking blind scouse for us suppers, but I thought if you could run down to the Scottie, you'd mebbe manage to get hold of a bone for stock and some bacon ends to cheer up the scouse a bit, like.' She plunged

her hand into her apron pocket and held out a damp and grimy paw with some coppers nestling on the palm. ‘I’ near on out of spuds, so get me tuppence worth, and if you manage to get some bones, better pick up some veggies for the stock pot – onions is nice, and I could do with a few more carrots, and peas are good at this time of year.’

‘If I get bacon bits, it won’t be blind scouse no more,’ Lizzie observed, taking the money from her aunt’s hand and pushing it into her skirt pocket. ‘The cheapest stuff is at the market so I’ll go there for the veggies, but I’ll shop around for bones and bacon bits, see what’s going cheap. And if I can’t get bones, you’ll not want the extra veggies for the stock, will you?’

‘You’ve gorra head on your shoulders, chuck,’ Aunt Annie wheezed, smiling broadly. ‘That’s why I’d rather you did me messages, ’cos it’d take me a month of Sundays to get Herbie to understand that there ain’t no stock without bones. But you’ll get bones, queen. You’re like meself,’ she gave another wheezy laugh, ‘all charm and beauty, the sort no feller can resist. You’ll charm some nice marrer bones out of some butcher, I don’t doubt it for a moment.’ She put the saucepan down on the floor, heaved herself to her feet and gave Lizzie’s cheek an encouraging pat, handing her the large canvas bag which she always used for bringing home a quantity of vegetables. ‘Off you go now, queen, and don’t be too long or you’ll get no scouse till tomorrer breakfast.’

Lizzie, grinning, let herself out of the house, skipped down the dirty steps and stood for a moment, contemplating the game of hopscotch which her friends were doggedly playing, despite her absence. Sally glanced up. ‘Where’s you going, Lizzie? Shall I come along wi’ you?’

‘No, you stay here and finish the game,’ Lizzie said grandly. She glanced around the court with its blackened walls and high, narrow houses, so tall that the sunshine

never penetrated the place. At the end where the houses finished were the lavatories, and beside them the one water tap which served all twelve houses in the court. Above the lavatories reared a blackened brick wall, all of twenty foot high, which did its own share of preventing the sunshine from ever making an appearance in the court. But by tipping her head right back, Lizzie could see the hazy blue of the sky and guessed that it must be a nice sunny day. So though under other circumstances she would have enjoyed Sally's company, she thought that today she would be better off by herself. Aunt Annie had given her no extra money to buy buns or a toffee apple for running the messages and Sally, who was an only child and whose father worked on the docks, would not have dreamed of going a message without some reward. Lizzie knew her aunt was not mean and would have given her the odd ha'penny had she been able to do so, and had no desire for Sally to spread the news around that Mrs Grey was a miser, who wouldn't even part with a ha'penny for messages.

'Why don't you stop and finish the game, queen?' Sally asked plaintively. She would probably have enjoyed getting out of the court for a bit, but clearly did not like to do so once her offer had been rejected. 'Surely your aunt can't want her messages that quick?'

Lizzie hesitated, but only for a moment. It was not as though hopscotch was a game in which you won anything or even gained any particular kudos; if it had been ollies or cherry pobs she would have had difficulty in tearing herself away, especially had she been on a winning streak, but she could play hopscotch any old day and besides, if she did not get a move on, the scouse would not have time to become impregnated with the delicious taste of bacon – if she got the bacon bits, that was. So she looked around her and saw a small urchin, filthier than any of the others, hanging around looking wistfully towards the hopscotch squares.

Lizzie indicated the child. ‘She’ll take over for me, Sal,’ she said grandly, then turned and addressed the younger girl. ‘You’re dyin’ for a game, ain’t you, queen?’

The small girl said that she was and Sally sighed and waved a hand to Lizzie, who hurried out of the court and into the sunshine of Burlington Street with a clear conscience. At least she had not spoiled Sally’s game, she thought, turning right towards the Scottie. As she had guessed from that glimpse of the sky overhead, it was a lovely sunny day and she trotted happily along the pavement, eyeing the shops as she passed them. When she reached Lime Kiln Lane she turned right again and presently emerged on to the main road, opposite Paddy’s Market, deciding she would try Staunton’s first, since it was the nearest butcher’s shop. Before reaching the butcher’s, however, she glanced into a nearby shop window, not to examine the goods on display but to check her appearance. Looking critically at her reflection, she pulled a face at her skimpy grey cotton dress – it had once been blue but had lost its colour and gained its greyness from rare and unenthusiastic washings – and at her bare and dirty feet. However there was nothing she could do about either dress or feet so she turned her attention to her hair and face. Earlier that day, she had pulled back her thick, fair locks and plaited them into a pigtail, securing the end with a frayed and elderly boot lace. Now, she untied the boot lace and let her hair fall free. Then she licked the hem of her skirt, wiped it briskly round her face and, having checked as well as she could that she was reasonably clean, she abandoned her reflection and walked along to Staunton’s Family Butcher’s shop. She glanced in through the open doorway and saw that Mrs Staunton herself was serving customers along with Joe Lydd who lived in the next court to Cranberry, off Burlington Street.

Lizzie sidled in through the door, scuffing her feet in the thick sawdust and wrinkling her nose at the smell of blood. It would have been easier to have obtained some bones, she knew, had she been buying meat of some sort as well, but it was clear from the small amount in her pocket that Aunt Annie was a trifle short this week. However, if she could just make sure it was Joe who served her and not Mrs Staunton, she might be lucky.

The fat shawl-clad woman in front of her took a newspaper-wrapped parcel of chops off the battered wooden counter and turned to leave and Lizzie allowed another woman to take her place, pretending she had dropped a coin into the sawdust at her feet, until Mrs Staunton was safely engaged with the new customer. Then she gave Joe her most engaging grin. ‘Gorrany bacon bits, Joe? Six penn’orth would be grand,’ she hissed, pulling her money out of her skirt pocket. ‘And – and a marrer bone or two, for stock?’

Joe turned away, saying over his shoulder: ‘I’ll pick you out some nice ones, chuck,’ as he made his way into the back, presently returning with an untidy parcel which clearly contained more than six penn’orth of bacon bits. Neither Lizzie nor Joe made any comment, however, she merely giving him a grateful smile as she handed over the cash.

Leaving the shop with the canvas bag a good deal heavier than it had been, Lizzie felt well satisfied with her first purchase. She did not know what proportion of the parcel was bacon bits and what marrow bones, but knew that Joe would not cheat her. The parcel would probably prove to contain a good deal more than six penn’orth, however it was made up.

Humming a tune beneath her breath, Lizzie sauntered along Juvenal Street, turning left when she reached Cazneau. She kept to the left-hand pavement for the right-

hand one was bounded by the back of the market and offered no diversion in the way of shop windows. Presently she crossed the road and dived down Great Nelson Street, turning into the market and beginning to examine the fruit and vegetables displayed on the stalls on either hand.

Lizzie, along with most other Liverpool children, loved the market. The delicious smell of fruit and vegetables and the rich repartee in which the stallholders indulged were enough to keep her happy for a whole morning, but since she had sensibly bought the two penn'orth of potatoes and carrots first, she decided that she would have to get a move on or by the time she reached home her arms would have stretched until her fingers grazed her ankles. Chuckling at the thought of how absurd she would look with arms like a chimpanzee's, she bought a couple of pounds of peas and some onions from a fresh-faced country woman, graciously accepted a bruised but perfectly eatable orange from the stallholder and set off for home. When she reached Scotland Road, she stood her canvas bag down for a moment and squatted on the pavement beside it, peeling and eating her orange. She half wished she had let Sally come along, since they could have shared the orange, but on the other hand, the delights of a whole fruit rarely came her way and Sally, she knew, had oranges whenever she fancied them. The joys of being an only child were considerable, Lizzie thought, remembering the first seven years of her own life when her mam and dad had spoiled and petted their little daughter. Still, Lizzie knew she was lucky to have Aunt Annie; but for her mother's sister taking her in, she would have ended up in one of the many orphans' homes in Liverpool, just a number amongst other numbers, kept from the streets and the warm and bustling life which she so loved, confined to an ugly uniform, short walks through the streets in a supervised crocodile, and

with no choice but to obey the adults who had her in charge.

Lizzie finished the orange, spitting the pips into the palm of her hand and shoving them into the stained pocket of her skirt. Once, long ago, her father's family had farmed on the Wirral in Cheshire and her mother had often teased her for her love of growing things. There was little enough soil to be found in the courts off Burlington Street, but whenever Lizzie could scrape together enough to fill an empty conny-onny tin, she would plant something in it. As a result, Aunt Annie's front parlour had a window sill crowded with strange plants, of which her aunt was rather proud, though it was Lizzie who watered them, turned them daily so that they grew straight and did not lean towards the light, and generally fussed over them. If I could grow an orange tree, Lizzie thought longingly, perhaps I could be like Sally and have an orange whenever I fancied one. She fingered the orange pips; there were five. Imagine five orange trees flourishing in Aunt Annie's front parlour, their fruit as brightly glowing as any sun!

Smiling at her own fancies, Lizzie got to her feet and heaved at the canvas bag once more. It was dreadfully heavy, and dreadfully awkward too so that when she tried to take two hands to it, it made walking forward impossible, banging into her legs and forcing her to change its weight from hand to hand and even, at one point, to tow it along the pavement like a recalcitrant dog which simply sits down whilst its owner heaves on its lead.

She was engaged in this undignified pastime when she noticed the boys. By now she had reached Burlington Street, and ahead of her three husky boys were kicking a round stone or ball of some kind along the pavement, passing it from one to the other and considerably inconveniencing the passers-by. Lizzie hesitated; she had no particular desire to get her ankles or her canvas bag

kicked, either by mistake or on purpose, and she knew a good deal more than she liked about the horseplay indulged in by her cousins. From the look of them, the boys ahead were in the sort of mood to enjoy either teasing her or, should she get in their way, simply trampling her underfoot. What was more, despite the fact that they were nearing Cranberry Court, she did not think that the boys came from this neighbourhood. Certainly she had no recollection of ever having seen them before. So she loitered, continuing to pull the heavy bag along the pavement, albeit slowly.

All might have been well had not one of the boys got a little ahead of the other two, dribbling the ball, which he then kicked hard in the direction of his companions. Too hard, as it turned out. Both boys dodged the missile and it shot past them and landed, with a painful crack, on Lizzie's bare ankle.

Lizzie promptly forgot caution, her hard-earned knowledge of boys, and her desire to stay out of trouble. For a moment, she simply squeaked and tried to nurse her ankle, dropping the bag as she did so, but then a flood of invective rose to her lips and she told the boys what she thought of them, saying things which would have whitened her mother's hair, had she been alive to hear them.

Oddly enough, this masterly reading of their characters did not seem to infuriate two of the three boys, but filled them with what looked rather like admiration. The tallest of them, a fair-haired boy, in ragged kecks and shirt, whistled. He wore a checked cap on the back of his head and boots which appeared to be several sizes too large for him. Lizzie saw that, despite his size, he was no more than fifteen or sixteen and his two companions probably a year or so younger. The boy nearest her, however, was scowling. He was dark and stocky, with eyebrows that met in the middle and a square, pugnacious chin. He came towards her,

bending to pick up the ball and examining it as though he feared Lizzie's ankle had done it no good. 'What was you doing, acting as goalie, when no one so much as asked you to join in the game?' he said aggressively, glaring at her. 'You'd got no call to interfere with us, lerralone giving us a mouthful and using language a docker wouldn't stoop to. Just who do you think you are?'

'I were attacked, that's who I am,' Lizzie said ungrammatically. She glanced down at the vegetables rolling around the pavement. 'Look what you've done with your bleedin' ball! Them's me aunt's veggies and that, what she's been waiting for half the morning. You slowed me up anyway, 'cos I dare not try and pass you – you were taking up the whole perishin' pavement between the three of you and now me aunt will think I've nicked a few fades from the vegetable market instead of buying good fresh stuff.' She picked up a sorry-looking turnip, which had gathered a good deal of dust before coming to a halt in the gutter, and displayed its bruised and battered complexion to the scowling boy. 'Look at that! No one would take that for a fresh turnip, not now.'

'Well, you can't have done them messages much good yourself, dragging that bag along the pavement as though there were coals in it,' the scowling one remarked. 'Why didn't you carry the bag like a Christian? You ain't done that much good, either,' he finished, eyeing the dirty canvas bag disparagingly.

'Oh, leave off, Geoff,' the fair-haired boy said amicably. 'Them's a lot of messages for a bit of a girl to carry and that bleedin' cricket ball is hard as a stone – you can still see the mark on her leg, so it must have hurt.' He bent down and began to scoop vegetables back into the bag, and after a moment's hesitation both his companions began to do likewise, although the scowling one did so with a bad grace. Lizzie, meanwhile, sat herself down on the dusty

pavement to examine her wound and saw that it was already turning blue and puffy and hurt horribly when she touched it.

When all the vegetables were back in the bag, she struggled to her feet, giving a gasp of pain as she put her weight on her right leg. She looked pathetically up at the tallest of the boys, saying tremulously: ‘I think me leg must be broke. It hurts something terrible when I try to walk. Oh, oh, what’ll I do? Me Aunt Annie will tear the hair from me head if I don’t get these veggies home soon.’

The middle-sized boy, the one who had not yet spoken, bent and seized the canvas bag. ‘Where d’you live, queen?’ he asked gruffly. ‘I’ll carry your messages home for you, seeing as it was me what dodged out of the way of the ball. I should of stopped it, but it were coming so bleedin’ fast . . .’

The tall boy gave an exaggerated sigh but shook his head. ‘No, Tom, let our Geoff carry the bag, then you and me, being almost of a height, can make a chair and get the young ’un indoors.’

This was going a good deal further than Lizzie thought desirable, for though her leg certainly did hurt, she was well aware that it was merely bruised and not broken in the slightest. Besides, she had no desire for the boys to walk into the house and tell Aunt Annie how she had been dragging the messages along the pavement. What was more, if Uncle Perce were home, there would almost certainly be trouble. Her uncle was a strange man, pleasant enough when sober, but a raging devil when he had drink in him. Many a time Lizzie had hidden beneath the blankets on her little truckle bed while, in the room below, her aunt and uncle shrieked and fought until one or other of them triumphed.

Accordingly, as the boys bore down upon her, she said, affecting an air of wonder: ‘Well now, if that ain’t the strangest thing! The pain’s ebbing fast – I do declare, I believe I *can* walk after all.’

All three boys grinned, Geoff with the infuriating air of one who’d known she was lying all along. ‘Well, if you ain’t going to carry the girl, Sid, then I’m damned if I’ll lug her bleedin’ bag all the way to – to wherever she lives,’ he said truculently. Lizzie thought, balefully, that Geoff would probably grow up to be like her Uncle Perce, or possibly worse, since the feller seemed to be in a perpetual bad temper, even when sober as a judge.

Geoff dumped the bag on the pavement but it appeared that Sid, as the eldest of the three, held considerable sway over them, for without losing his smile he said in a quiet but dangerous voice: ‘You’ll do as I say, young ’un. You’ll tek the lady’s bag wherever she wants you to tek it, do you hear me? Sid Ryder’s the boss and what I says goes, remember?’

Lizzie waited for Geoff to object, or even to storm off in a temper, but instead he bent and hefted her bag once more, though she distinctly heard him mutter as he did so: ‘Lady? I don’t see no lady, only a bleedin’ little kid what hasn’t had a wash for a week by the looks of her.’

Lizzie considered replying sharply, but decided against it. The bag was heavy and although her leg was only bruised it would not be improved by having to bear the weight of her shopping as well as that of her own small person. So she pretended she had not heard the remark and limped ahead of Geoff while the two older boys disappeared out of sight amongst the hurrying Saturday crowds.

Although Lizzie had not noticed her, Chinky, as she was always known, had been an interested observer of the

whole scene from her position ten yards behind the boys. She often followed them around though they seemed totally unaware of her, as indeed she meant them to be. She followed them for a good reason: when he was in the money, Sid occasionally handed out the odd ha'penny to any child who was down on their luck and by a dint of crossing his path every now and then, she had managed to become the temporary owner of several ha'pennies.

Chinky was a pathetic scrap of humanity, the unlovely result of a brief union between a Chinese seaman and what the more respectable women of the courts called 'a part-time prozzie'. Chinky's mam, whom she scarcely remembered, had gone off with some feller when she had been no more than four, leaving her little daughter to the untender mercies of a neighbour, already cursed with eleven kids of her own and neither time nor patience for an extra mouth to feed. When she was seven, Chinky had heard Aunt Lily, as she had been taught to call her foster mother, telling a friend that she meant to dump Chinky in one of the orphan asylums which abounded in the city. She knew little enough about orphanages, but had a shrewd idea that she would not enjoy such a restricted life. Accordingly, she had taken herself off very early each morning, never going home – if you could call it home – until late at night when the reluctant foster mother and her family were already in bed. She lived on any scraps she could pick up from Aunt Lily's pantry, but mostly she fed herself, wheedling bits of food from stallholders and shopkeepers, good-hearted publicans, or the men who always saved some of their carry-out for the street kids who clustered around them when the factory gates opened to spew them into the street at the end of their working day.

That had been in the early days, of course. Now, at the age of around ten, for Chinky had no idea even of the year in which she had been born, she managed a good deal

better. Because she had never attended school – no school would accept a child who was always barefoot, filthy, and in rags – she had to be careful to avoid the truant officers on the lookout for kids sagging off school, but such persons were easily identifiable and she steered clear of them.

Being unable to read was a real disadvantage, she knew that. But she was becoming quick and clever in other ways. She knew that Sid stole, and admired him for it because he never got caught, and though she was careful never to intrude upon him and his friends, she wondered sometimes if Sid were aware of her; if so, it was possible that the ha'pennies which came her way were a form of hush money: 'Don't tell,' Sid was saying as he slipped her a coin. 'Keep your mouth shut and your eyes open and mebbe there'll be another ha'penny in it for you.'

However, when she really put her mind to it, she could not believe that he would put up with her following him around if he had actually noticed. Someone like Sid, who lived on his wits, would be careful not to attract unwanted attention by allowing a scruffy kid like herself to follow him about. He was old enough to escape the notice of such persons as schools' inspectors and would not want to be involved with a kid who was plainly not only sagging off school but probably up to no good as well. So Chinky continued to follow Sid around, more careful than ever to remain unnoticed.

With considerable astonishment she had become aware of the addition of Geoff to the little gang who thieved so expertly. He did not look the type – *was* not the type – to go thieving up and down the Scottie, but she very soon appreciated Sid's cleverness in involving the younger boy. Geoff was so neat, so well brushed and well fed, that no one would ever dream he was keeping douse for Sid and his gang, let alone conniving at their carryings-on. So this afternoon she had watched with great interest as the

cricket ball first knocked Lizzie's basket on to the floor, and secondly brought the four of them into what appeared to be lively conversation. Had Sid not been involved, Chinky would have streaked forward to grab as many of the rolling vegetables as she could hold, but since he was, in a sense, a friend, she let the opportunity pass by, though her mouth watered at the sight of the bright green pea pods. She was too far away to catch what anyone was saying so was considerably surprised when the group split up, Sid and Tom continuing to walk swiftly along the pavement while Geoff, leaning sideways with the weight of the girl's canvas bag, headed for the courts.

After only the slightest hesitation, Chinky began to pad along behind Geoff and the girl. What were they up to? Why had Sid not gone along as well? And who *was* this girl? Chinky admired the long hay-coloured mass of hair which rippled almost down to the girl's waist and envied her the faded cotton dress and her air of independence; she was clearly someone to be reckoned with, otherwise Sid would not have made Geoff carry her bag. Chinky had been too far away to hear what Sid had said, but only an idiot would have been unable to interpret his look of command, and Chinky was no idiot. It occurred to her now, following well behind them into Cranberry Court, that so far as she knew, neither Sid, Tom nor Geoff had any time for girls. She would never have dreamed of suggesting to Sid, even had she known him sufficiently well, that she herself might be useful to him. So surely he would not be interested in adding this girl to his gang, no matter how clean and bright she might seem in comparison to Chinky herself. Probably, she decided, Sid had wanted to get rid of Geoff for some reason and had sent him off with the girl simply to get him out of the way.

Geoff and the girl turned towards one of the houses and Chinky sauntered past, not wanting to be seen following

them, but she need not have worried. There was a brief exchange of remarks between the girl and Geoff, then she pushed open the front door and the two of them disappeared inside.

There was a game of run-in skipping going on in the centre of the court and Chinky, who despite her lack of practice was a good skipper, jumped into the rope. The two girls on either end continued to revolve it smoothly, accepting her presence without comment. Indeed, Chinky, who rarely played any sort of game because life was too serious for such amusements when you had only yourself to rely on, proved to be so good that she was last one in and therefore was invited to take a turn at holding the rope. Feeling rather pleased with herself, she was taking the rope when the door of number nine opened again and Geoff and the girl came out.

‘Want to have a go, Lizzie?’ the biggest of the girls shouted across. ‘We’re just startin’ again.’

So the girl’s name was Lizzie, Chinky thought as Lizzie smiled but shook her head. Chinky handed her end of the rope to the girl nearest her, muttering an excuse that it was time for her tea, and made off in Geoff and Lizzie’s wake, keeping well back. On former occasions she had always followed Sid home, since he lived in the same court as she did, so she had no idea where Geoff lived, though she knew he and Sid had been at St Mark’s school together. Now she would discover where Geoff hung out, and perhaps she would also find out why a respectable boy like him should take up with the likes of Sid. Smiling gleefully to herself, Chinky slipped out of the court and turned right along the dusty pavement, keeping her eye on Lizzie’s fair hair as it bobbed along ahead of her.

When Lizzie and Geoff had reached Cranberry Court, Lizzie unbent enough to turn and give her companion a smile. Not

that he noticed because he was staring straight ahead, his scowl, if anything, deeper and more ferocious than before. ‘I live at number nine, the one with the red curtains,’ Lizzie said briefly, pointing. The curtains had been red once, she realised belatedly, but were now more of a dirty brown. ‘If you dump the messages at the top of the steps, I’ll bring ’em right inside.’ As they wended their way through the groups of children playing on the filthy paving stones, she wondered whether she should thank him and decided to do so since boys were strange and awkward creatures and you never knew what they would do if they felt themselves slighted. Many a clout round the ear had been delivered by Henry, Ned, Denis and Herbie when she had, in some way, either transgressed against the mysterious male code or annoyed them in some other fashion.

As they crossed the court, heading for the door of number nine, Lizzie glanced at Geoff and saw that he was eyeing his surroundings with considerable interest. She thought this odd, assuming that the boys were local and would know the courts as well as she did, but this one, judging by his intent appraisal, was astonished to find himself in such a place. Indeed, when they reached the steps which led up to her door, he put the shopping bag down and turned to her. ‘Ain’t it dark, though?’ he said. ‘After all that sunshine, coming in here was like descending into the pit. Lived here long, have you?’

‘Since me mam and dad died,’ Lizzie said briefly, ‘before then I lived in Bootle. Bootle’s grand, it’s only a step away from Seaforth Sands.’ She sighed reminiscently. ‘Me dad were a seaman,’ she ended rather lamely, realising that she had been going to tell Geoff a good deal more than he could possibly want to know.

She was about to take the bag and thank him for his help when he swung it up once more and clumped up the steps ahead of her; clearly he meant to take a look inside

the house while he had the chance, and Lizzie did not know that she blamed him. She supposed vaguely that he probably lived somewhere a good deal smarter, and knew that, given the opportunity, she would have liked to have a nose around his home, wherever it might be. Accordingly, she slipped passed him at the top of the steps and pushed open the door, then led the way in, saying cheerfully: 'We'll go in the kitchen; the other room's the parlour, only we're not in there much, 'cept on summer evenings and at Christmas, 'cos the fire's hardly ever lit in there – can't afford coal for two. I live with me Aunt Annie and Uncle Perce Grey.' She opened the kitchen door and entered the room, smiling at her aunt who was stirring a pan over the fire. One good thing about Aunt Annie was that she never minded you bringing your friends, so long as you didn't offer them a meal. 'I'm back wi' the veggies, Aunt,' she said cheerfully. 'This is me pal Geoff. He carried the bag for me 'cos it's awful heavy.'

Aunt Annie smiled at Geoff and waved a spoon in greeting but said anxiously, 'Wharrabout the marrer bones, queen? And the bacon bits?'

'Oh, I gorrem all right,' Lizzie said. She took the bag from Geoff and emptied it out on to the large kitchen table, then had to field a sliding mountain of vegetables to prevent them cascading all over the floor. Rather to her surprise, Geoff jumped forward to assist her, even pursuing a round, brown onion across the kitchen floor and recapturing it on the very hearth. The butcher's parcel, being at the bottom of the bag, was now on top of the pile; Lizzie picked it off and began to unwrap the newspaper, revealing an enormous marrow bone, chopped into four, and a quantity of excellent bacon bits.

Aunt Annie, with an exclamation of pleasure, seized the bacon bits and waddled across to the fire, tipping them into her big, blackened stewpot. 'Good gal! By the time this has

simmered for a few hours, you'll not find a better scouse in the whole of Liverpool. Will you give me a hand to chop the veggies for the stockpot, queen? Or do you and your pal have other plans?'

'I'll give you a hand . . .' Lizzie was beginning, when Geoff chimed in, 'I'm OK with a kitchen knife and I've nowt else on, so I might as well give a hand, too. I haven't got no plans . . . not now Sid and Tom have buggered off,' he added gruffly, in a voice so low that Lizzie only just caught it. She was about to tell him – and pretty sharply – that she could manage perfectly well without him and that it was not *her* fault that his pals had deserted him, when she looked at his face. He seemed eager, as though the prospect of chopping vegetables was a pleasant one, and she realised, that far from blaming her, he was simply stating a fact: his pals had gone on without him, so he was at a loose end.

Accordingly, the two of them settled down at the kitchen table and began to peel and chop the vegetables, talking in low tones while Aunt Annie sat in the creaking basket chair with a broken pair of spectacles perched on her nose, and read last night's copy of the *Echo*.

In point of fact, with both of them working on the vegetables, Aunt Annie's big, black stockpot was soon brimming and, without even being asked, Geoff went to the buckets of water which stood under the table where Aunt Annie's washing-up bowl was perched, and filled the pot to within an inch of its rim. Then he turned to his hostess and asked her politely whether there were any more tasks which he and Lizzie could help her with.

Aunt Annie slid her spectacles down her nose and looked at the two children over the top of them. 'The two of you can heft me stockpot on to the fire – the scouse can pull over a bit – and refill me water buckets and then your time's your own,' she said generously. 'Lizzie, there's a

batch of soda bread in the bin and a jar of jam on the shelf. Make yourselves some butties and take them with you.'

'Thanks, Aunt Annie,' Lizzie said, grabbing a couple of the galvanised buckets from beneath the sink and handing one to Geoff. He, however, firmly took the second bucket as well, advising her to: 'Make them butties while I fetches the water,' in a low but firm tone.

For a moment, Lizzie wondered whether he intended to steal the buckets and run off with them before he was missed, then decided that this was too ridiculous for words. Besides, even if he gained two buckets, he would lose his jam butties, and what boy would risk that? So she went over to the cupboard where Aunt Annie kept the food, hacked four hefty slices off the loaf and spread them with Aunt Annie's delicious strawberry jam. Then she wrapped them in a piece of greaseproof paper and was crossing the kitchen when Geoff reappeared in the doorway, a full bucket in either hand. 'Here you are, Missus,' he said breezily, thumping the buckets on to the floor. 'You ready for the off then, queen?' he asked Lizzie.

She shoved the greaseproof-wrapped parcel into her pocket and nodded vigorously. She was more puzzled by Geoff than ever, and suspected that as soon as they left the court, he might abandon her, but that worried her not at all. If she wanted companionship, she could call for Sally, or Bet, or one of her other friends. But on such a warm and sunny day there were a variety of attractions which could be enjoyed by a solitary child and even as they left the house, Lizzie was mulling over which she would prefer. She had no money, so the picture house and the swimming baths were both out, but she could skip a leckie and go off to the Pier Head, or even to Seaforth Sands, without having to part with cash. If the tide was out, she could go down to the Landing Stage, slide down the chains on to the mud, and have a delicious, dirty time, seeing what treasures had